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Report of the Secretary-General

The regional commissions in the context of a programme for reform of the United Nations

A. Introductory remarks

1. Both the Secretariat and the intergovernmental machinery of the United Nations have been concerned in bringing the regional commissions fully into the reform process. In response to General Assembly resolution 50/227 of 24 May 1996 and Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/41 of 26 July 1996, each and every one of the regional commissions, with differences in content and scope, has carried out reforms aimed at achieving greater relevance, efficiency and effectiveness.[1] The individual reviews of these reforms, which were debated by the Council at its substantive session of 1997,[2] were basically driven by the intergovernmental machinery at the regional level (that is to say the commissions) and by the senior levels of their respective secretariats.

2. On the other hand, the programme of the Secretary-General for reform of the United Nations invites the Economic and Social Council to explore the role of the regional commissions not only from the perspective of their individual contributions to their regions, but also from the vantage point of the overall activities of the United Nations. For this reason, and as a complement to the individual reviews referred to above, the Secretary-General recommended to the Council that it initiate a general review of the regional commissions.[3] The present report purports to assist the Council in responding to his recommendation, especially during the next 12 months.

B. The main issues

3. It is important to recognize that, in effect, the regional commissions play a double role. On the one hand, as regional outposts of the United Nations, they carry out certain functions so as to contribute to the Organization's global work programme. On the other hand, as the regional expressions of the United Nations, they occupy a niche in the institutional landscape of their respective geographical

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areas. At the programmatic level, the division of specific outputs corresponding to either of these two activities is sometimes blurred, but tends to complement the dual role of the regional commissions.

4. Most simply expressed, the role of the regional commissions as part of the broader United Nations requires a more focused distribution of tasks among Headquarters, regional and national activities being carried out by the United Nations, based on the comparative advantages of each of these geographical expressions of the Organization. Hence, the call of the Secretary-General for "the most appropriate division of labour". Developing criteria on how to characterize the "comparative advantages" of each part of the Organization (cost-effectiveness, core competencies, historical heritage, organizational consideration) is one of the challenges facing both Governments and the Secretariat in respect of making the United Nations more effective and efficient.

5. Another question that will come up in the quest to determine core responsibilities based on geographical criteria (global, regional, national) relates to the type of activities, distributed between normative tasks (analytical and norm-setting functions) and operational activities (technical assistance, project execution, training). In fact, the interdisciplinary, multisectoral approach of the regional commissions falls within both the Organization's "economic and social affairs" and its "development cooperation". Indeed, the regional commissions' normative tasks are rooted in their operational activities, and vice versa, thus establishing a mutually reinforcing link between them. This fact only highlights the need for close interaction between the regional commissions and the rest of the system.

6. In the same vein, the role of the regional commissions as part of the institutional landscape of their respective geographical areas requires close cooperation between the regional commissions and other regional bodies in order to reinforce synergies, as well as to avoid or at least lessen overlapping and duplication. This is especially true where the regional commissions and other regional bodies serve essentially the same grouping of member Governments.

7. Tackling these issues requires actions both at the Secretariat and at the intergovernmental level. There is, in effect, a certain parallelism in defining the relations:

(a) Within the Secretariat, between Headquarters and the regional commissions (basically involving the extent to which the Secretary-General delegates functions to the executive secretaries);

(b) Between the Economic and Social Council and the regional intergovernmental forums (the commissions).

These are all complex issues, which should be dealt with progressively as part of a process of change and adaptation.

8. If the member States of the Economic and Social Council accept the proposition that the regional commissions have two separate and distinguishable roles, there are additional conceptual problems that need to be resolved. First, even the part of the regional commissions' work programme that can be relatively self-contained and defined by the commissions themselves needs to respond to the guidelines and policies of the United Nations. Thus, the Council might wish to further clarify the way it interacts with the commissions and the scope of the latter's responsibilities, in order to fulfil its obligation of providing overall guidance and coordination. Second, some understanding should be reached regarding the desirable mix of activities under each of the two roles mentioned above, concerning whether that mix should change over time (and, if so, in what direction), and whether it should vary from one commission to another.

C. The regional commissions as part of the global activities of the United Nations

9. Seen from the vantage point of the overall activities of the United Nations, the regional commissions can play an important role not only as suppliers of inputs to the global work programme, but also as links between national and global activities. Indeed, many of the Organization's functions and activities cannot be carried out in each country owing to a lack of critical mass on the Organization's part at the national level; but often it is neither practical nor cost-effective to try to carry out those functions and activities from a centralized headquarters.

10. For example, regional activities – and the regional commissions – offer the possibility of greatly improving the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the United Nations in carrying out certain tasks. These tasks appear to include, within their geographical jurisdiction, the collecting, ordering and interpreting of statistics and indicators; the provision of selected technical assistance activities; analytical work that draws on national and regional empirical observations, and that generates inputs to the Organization's overall capacity to "produce ideas"; and the capacity to convene Governments and non-governmental personalities. The regional commissions are also an important mechanism

for articulating regional perspectives on global issues, and should use their convening power to this effect.

11. The opportunity of bringing the activities of the regional commissions more closely within the compass of the overall activities of the United Nations in the economic and social sectors should be greatly enhanced by their active participation in the Executive Committee for Economic and Social Affairs and in the United Nations Development Group, a decision that has already been implemented. The Secretary-General further proposes carrying out joint exercises, between each commission and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs as well as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), outlining the inputs that the commissions would be expected to provide to global programmes and the support the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UNCTAD would be expected to provide to each commission during a predetermined period. These exercises will take the form of letters of understanding, which should be further reflected in the programming and budgeting of each of the departments concerned.

12. In light of the above, more work is clearly needed within the Secretariat to define "who does what", based not on *presumed* but on *real and proved* comparative advantages both in functional categories (research, information-gathering, technical assistance, norm-setting, the advocacy role) and in subject categories (trade, technology, social issues, economic policy-making, sustainable development, governance). The Secretary-General has asked the Deputy Secretary-General to continue building on the existing reviews to identify the proved comparative advantages of each of the component parts of the Secretariat, in order to obtain the most and best-quality outputs at the least cost.

13. The Secretary-General believes that the intergovernmental machinery, especially the Economic and Social Council, also has an important role to play in clarifying what the core functions of the regional commissions should be. In a real sense, these functions are, at least partially, supply-driven, since they reflect, among other aspects, the stock of expertise that has been developed over the years in each secretariat of the regional commissions. However, the fundamental consideration has been, and should continue to be, the region's perceived needs, as reflected in the demands of member Governments. The ongoing exercises in some of the regional commissions on priority-setting are a step in the right direction, not only towards more useful outputs, but also towards developing activities that would lead to a rational division of labour between the regional commissions and the Secretariat at the global level.

D. The regional commissions as part of their respective regional institutional landscapes

14. In the judgement of the Secretary-General, a strong case can be made for maintaining a regional expression in the overall activities of the United Nations. Regional cooperation within the United Nations system can be defended on its own merits, as well as on the basis of its being a potentially important building block contributing towards the Organization's central role of promoting development and international cooperation.

15. Furthermore, regional activities – and the regional commissions – can greatly assist the Organization in integrating topics in the economic, social and political spheres (including in post-conflict peace-building situations), and in "building bridges" between economic and social policy makers. In effect, the regional commissions deal with a broad spectrum of both public and private agents, and can thereby play a useful role in one of the core activities of any intergovernmental secretariat: interaction with its member Governments.

16. On the other hand, the United Nations must improve coordination of the activities of the regional commissions with other regional activities within the United Nations system proper, as well as with non-United Nations regional and subregional bodies. Indeed, the relation between the regional commissions and the Organization's regional activities deserves especially close attention. In the past, the regional commissions have tried to exercise "team leadership and responsibility for coordination and cooperation ... of the relevant economic and social activities of the United Nations system in their respective regions" as called for by the General Assembly in the annex to its resolution 32/197 (para. 20). In more recent times, an effort of coordination was made at the regional level, replicating some of the characteristics of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). These efforts have been promising, but not entirely satisfactory. The main issue seems to centre around the relation between the entities that profess to "coordinate" and those that are supposed to be "coordinated".

17. The Secretary-General strongly believes, however, that the Organization should persevere in these efforts. Without calling into question the team leadership role that the General Assembly in its resolution 32/197 bestowed on the regional commissions, he would nevertheless like to place the coordination effort at the regional level directly under his aegis. The Secretary-General will request the Deputy

Secretary-General to convene yearly meetings, in each geographical area, between the regional commissions and all United Nations funds and programmes, agencies and departments engaged in regional and intercountry activities. These meetings would be designed to effect the exchange of information and promote joint action in order to reinforce synergies and avoid overlapping. When warranted, the Secretary-General will delegate the chairmanship of such meetings to other senior officials, including the executive secretaries of the regional commissions. Follow-up activities will further be pursued in the Executive Committee for Economic and Social Affairs and in the United Nations Development Group.

18. The need to improve coordination of the activities of the regional commissions with other regional activities within the United Nations system proper has a special dimension as regards the activities of the regional commissions, on the one hand, and the regional activities of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), on the other. In spite of consultations between the regional commissions and UNDP on preparation of the Regional Cooperation Framework and an ongoing policy dialogue, and in spite of the approval of joint key flagship projects in each region in the past two years, there still is room for greater complementarity in carrying out these types of activities.

19. This question should be further dealt with through four concrete measures. First, ample use should be made of the new machinery of coordination put in place as part of the reform process in order that the different parts of the United Nations may truly work together, regardless of the type of activities they undertake. In this regard, special mention should be made of the Executive Committees, the United Nations Development Group and the functioning of a Senior Management Group. Second, all of these should complement the Task Force created, in June 1994, jointly by UNDP and the regional commissions for the purpose of providing a forum to address issues of common concern, and whose work must be activated. Third, during the programming stages of its regional activities, UNDP should continue to consult closely with the respective regional commission, and regard the regional commissions as a partner in undertaking said activities. Fourth, programming in both UNDP and the regional commissions should maintain the recent trend of a thematic, multisectoral and cross-cutting approach, which will facilitate interaction between them.

20. There is clearly also a role of coordination to be assumed at the level of the intergovernmental machinery so as to reinforce synergies and avoid overlapping between the work programmes of the regional commissions and the regional activities of the development programmes and the agencies. The Economic and Social Council could perform this important role.

21. Promoting the involvement of the regional commissions in the preparation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and the country strategy note (CSN) would call for the regional commissions' more actively making known their specific capacities to provide support to the UNDAF process under the lead role of the United Nations Development Group. The regional commissions could make a particularly valuable contribution to these exercises by bringing to bear upon them the influence of regional perspectives; by sharing experiences on regional best practices in various areas of policy-making and development; and by reinforcing the system's contribution to linking national development to regional cooperation.

22. Regarding the interaction of the regional commissions with other, non-United Nations regional and subregional bodies, the Secretary-General has instructed the executive secretaries to maintain ongoing consultations that would reinforce synergies and lessen duplication of efforts. When possible, joint endeavours should be encouraged, especially where specific mandates exist from both United Nations and non-United Nations intergovernmental bodies, or where the possibilities exist to launch joint pilot projects.[4] In this context, the regional commissions should also host yearly meetings with non-United Nations regional organizations and, when appropriate, invite them to the meetings contemplated in paragraph 17 above.

23. In responding to the specific needs of the member States of their regions, the regional commissions are guided or inspired not only by the legislative directives of their intergovernmental bodies but also, in some cases, by the agenda articulated by the principal regional political body in the region. Hence, in ascertaining the mix of activities of the regional commissions as part of the institutional landscape of their geographical area, due regard must be paid to the arrangements that have developed over time for the regional commissions to respond to the agenda of principal regional political organs. In this context, coordination between the regional commissions and non-United Nations regional bodies must also be strengthened at the intergovernmental level. The Secretary-General believes that meetings of the bureaux of major regional organizations with the bureaux of the regional commissions could be very useful.

E. The interface between the two envisioned roles

24. There is at least one important role of the regional commissions that could be defined as an interface between their function as providers of inputs to the global work programme and their role as catalysts or facilitators for regional cooperation efforts in their respective geographical areas – namely, their capacity to bring global concerns to their regions, and regional concerns to global forums. Preparatory and follow-up activities to global conferences are part of this interface. However, in more general terms, the regional commissions can contribute to ensuring coherence of – and avoiding contradictions between – regional and global cooperation, as well as make important contributions to interregional cooperation. Here, again, general guidelines emanating from central decision-making forums are indispensable.

25. However, other issues must be dealt with. As stated previously, member Governments must decide how much of the regional commissions' work programme should be relatively self-contained and driven by regional needs, concerns and circumstances. The higher the relative importance of this role vis-à-vis the other role characterized above, the greater the degree of differentiation between each of the regional commissions. This is quite natural, given the different mandates emanating from each of the intergovernmental forums (the commissions) in addition to other features that point in the direction of differentiation: historical heritage, staffing, degree of regional identity, expectations of member Governments, role that other regional bodies are playing and so on. In other words, there is no compelling reason to try to apply the same rigid mold to each of the commissions in terms of its unique contribution to its respective member Governments.

26. Finally, the Secretary-General is convinced that both the Secretariat and member Governments could improve the flow of information between the regional and the global activities of the Organization. At the intergovernmental level, decisions adopted by delegations participating in the sessions of the regional commissions are not always relayed with agility to the permanent missions at Headquarters. At the Secretariat level, the work undertaken by the regional commissions is not always adequately disseminated, especially at United Nations Headquarters . Relatively simple remedies, including a more intensive use of the Internet, could make an important difference in this regard.

F. Recapitulation

27. In summary, and as mentioned earlier, looking at the role of the regional commissions in the broader context of United Nations reform raises complex issues. Moreover, just as reform must be viewed as a process, determining the way in which the regional commissions can contribute to improving the Organization's overall relevance, so effectiveness and efficiency must also be thought of in terms of progressive adaptations, within a specific time-frame agreed upon between member Governments and the Secretariat. In the preceding paragraphs, the Secretary-General has proposed four broad avenues that would lead to optimizing the potential that the regional commissions offer in terms of contributing to the central role of the United Nations in promoting development and international cooperation.

28. The first avenue originates in the internal reform efforts of each of the commissions, basically under the aegis of their respective intergovernmental machineries. In this regard, further measures to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the secretariats of each of the commissions should build on the reviews already undertaken to strengthen their internal functioning and effectiveness, to clarify their role and functions, and to define their relationships and promote cooperation with United Nations and non-United Nations entities. The Secretary-General believes that horizontal cooperation between the commissions should be encouraged, so that the best practices in any commission can, with the adequate adjustments, be adopted by the rest.

29. The second avenue originates in the need to determine a rational distribution of the Secretariat's responsibilities based on, among other criteria, geographical considerations, that is to say, what entities should undertake which activities at the global, regional, and national levels. For his part, the Secretary-General commits himself to (a) assuring active participation of the regional commissions in the Executive Committee for Economic and Social Affairs; (b) carrying out joint exercises, between each commission and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs as well as UNCTAD, outlining the inputs that the commissions would be expected to provide to global programmes and the support the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UNCTAD would be expected to provide to each commission, and consulting with intergovernmental forums so that the resulting letters of understanding will be reflected in the programming and budgeting of each of the departments concerned; (c) developing the criteria for measuring comparative advantages within the Secretariat through a joint effort of the Department of Economic and

Social Affairs, UNCTAD and the five regional commissions, under the direct coordination of the Deputy Secretary-General; and (d) optimizing the convening power of the regional commissions as an important mechanism for articulating regional perspectives on global issues.

30. The intergovernmental machinery can also make an important contribution to this effort. For its part, the Economic and Social Council may wish to clarify the manner in which it should interact with the intergovernmental machinery of the regional commissions, so that its overall guidance and coordination is fully taken into account. Furthermore, the ongoing exercises on priority-setting in some of the regional commissions should become a key ingredient in respect of involving Governments in defining the distribution of responsibilities of the United Nations overall work programme at the global, regional and national levels.

31. The third avenue refers to the need to improve coordination of the activities of the regional commissions with other regional activities within the United Nations system proper, which requires efforts on the part of the Secretariat and member Governments. The Secretary-General proposes (a) to organize, in each geographical area, yearly meetings between the regional commissions and all United Nations funds and programmes, agencies and departments engaged in regional and intercountry activities, in order to reinforce synergies and avoid overlapping of all United Nations regional activities; (b) to assure active participation of the regional commissions in the United Nations Development Group; (c) to reactivate the activities of the Task Force created in June 1994 by UNDP and the regional commissions; (d) to assure close consultations between UNDP and the regional commissions during the programming stages of the former's regional activities, and encourage partnerships between them in undertaking said activities; and (e) to enhance an approach to programming based on thematic, multisectoral and cross-cutting activities, which should facilitate interaction between the regional commissions and UNDP.

32. An important issue at the intergovernmental level relates to improved coordination between the Economic and Social Council and subsidiary committees of the General Assembly and the governing bodies of UNDP, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). In this respect, member Governments might wish to ensure the consistency of the decisions adopted in each forum regarding the issues discussed in this report. The Secretary-General will be further examining the role of the regional commissions in respect of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and the country strategy note and how it can be enhanced.

33. The fourth avenue pertains to the need to reinforce synergies and lessen duplication of efforts as regards the work programmes of the regional commissions and other non-United Nations regional or subregional bodies. In this spirit, the Secretary-General has instructed the executive secretaries of the regional commissions (a) to systematically seek a closer interaction with such bodies; (b) to undertake, when possible and as consistent with the overall objectives of the United Nations, joint endeavours with other regional entities, especially where specific mandates exist from both United Nations and non-United Nations intergovernmental bodies; and (c) to organize yearly meetings with non-United Nations regional and subregional bodies.

34. The above-mentioned efforts at intergovernmental-level coordination can also be strengthened. The Secretary-General is convinced that meetings of the bureaux of major regional organizations with the bureaux of the regional commissions could be very useful in this regard.

35. Finally, it is the belief of the Secretary-General that we can advance simultaneously as regards all of the actions proposed above. The substantive session of 1999 of the Economic and Social Council will provide a good opportunity to take stock of the progress achieved and to examine the next steps to be taken. In the meantime, advancing in the implementation of the measures proposed, both at the Secretariat and at the intergovernmental level, would be greatly facilitated through improved communications and the transmission of information on activities between the regional and the global levels of the Organization.

Notes

[1] All of these reforms aim at improved priority-setting, rationalization of intergovernmental meetings, efficiency measures and an improved allocation of human and financial resources to produce a relevant work programme.

[2] See E/1997/40 for a full description of the reforms undertaken until mid-1997, as well as addendum 1 to the present report.

[3] For ease of reference, the recommendation derived from paras. 136 and 137 of the report of the Secretary-General on renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform (A/51/950) states the following: "That the Economic and Social Council initiate a general review of the regional commissions, in consultation with other regional bodies and Governments, bearing in mind the individual reviews each commission has already conducted, in order to consider the core competencies of the regional commissions vis-à-vis global bodies and other regional and subregional

intergovernmental bodies; and evaluate the most appropriate division of labour with regard to both standard-setting and technical cooperation activities and prospects for further rationalization and consolidation."

[a] In this regard, the Summit of the Americas of 1996 and 1998 asked the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to join the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in supporting the Governments concerned in the establishment of a free trade area of the Americas. In the same vein, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Summit of 1989 asked the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), together with OAU and the African Development Bank (AfDB), to form a joint secretariat for supporting the establishment of the African Economic Community.